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...a guide to the second
happiest place on Earth.

Dark



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Dareville After Dark

A guide to the “second” happiest place on Earth by

LEIGH ELLWOOD

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Author's Note

Hello, friends of Dareville!

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Dareville After Dark is a guide to all the books and stories in the Dareville series – the people, the stories, and the great romances. It will be reissued as more is written. Enjoy!

Stay daring,

Leigh

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Part One

Who's Who in Dareville

Some were born here, some came to visit and ended up staying, others left and returned. Whatever their stories may be, one thing is clear: once in Dareville, it's difficult to leave. Come meet our town's more illustrious citizens.

Regulars

Brady Garriston

Brady certainly needs no introduction, but unless you've been stranded on a desert island or listening only to polka for the past thirty years, here's one for you! A rock and roll legend, Brady is perhaps one of the best known singer/songwriters in the world. With countless gold and platinum records to his name, Brady continues to burn up the album charts with his unique style of smoky vocals and bluesy piano.

A transplant from New York City, Brady came to Dareville to find inspiration. He still finds it today with his lovely wife and closest friends, and he calls Dareville home when he's not touring the world and performing to sell-out crowds.

Appears in: *Truth or Dare*, *Dare Me*, *Daring Young Man*, *Dare to Dream*, *Don't Dare the Reaper*, *Daring Hearts*; briefly seen in *The Dares That Bind* and *Where Angels Dare to Tread*; mentioned in *Dulce*.

Ellie Shaw

Ellie is hometown girl at heart, born and bred in Dareville yet not afraid to venture out for a bit of excitement on occasion. Luckily for her, she didn't have to go far to meet and fall in love with one of the most famous musicians in the world. She loves her town, too, and is always happy to support it. Formerly a teacher at Dareville's prestigious primary academy, Ellie now works as her husband's business partner and number one fan.

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Appears in: *Truth or Dare, Dare Me, Daring Young Man, Dare to Dream, Don't Dare the Reaper, Daring Hearts*; briefly alluded to in *The Dares That Bind*.

Cal Briscoe

A sought-after studio musician, Cal has performed with some of the top names in the music industry. You might not recognize his name or face, but assuredly you've heard his heart-pounding bassline on a number of Top 40 hits over the last few decades. These days, Cal prefers the not-so-quiet life in Dareville and spends time with his own band, the Cal Briscoe Four, playing to delighted crowds around town and throughout Virginia Beach. That is, of course, when he's not playing around his with lady love.

Appears in: *Truth or Dare, Dare Me, Daring Young Man, Dare to Dream, Don't Dare the Reaper, A Daring Kiss, Daring Hearts*; briefly alluded to in *The Dares That Bind, Where Angels Dare to Tread* and *Dulce*.

Sue Carmichael

All her life, Sue Carmichael held a fascination for beauty and a desire to preserve it. From her first photography class in high school she was hooked, and now Sue runs her own studio in historic Dareville. Stop by her gallery and see Dareville through her eyes in the beautiful photos she's taken over the years. If you need somebody to photograph formal events, weddings, or family portraits, Sue's your gal.

Appears in: *Truth or Dare, Dare Me, Daring Young Man, Dare to Dream, Don't Dare the Reaper, A Daring Kiss, Daring Hearts*.

Lauren McKenna

Lauren is a born teacher and planner. If you need something done, Lauren is the one who can arrange everything. It's no wonder her peers at Dareville Primary Academy consistently praise her zest for learning and community pride, though these days Lauren teaches the finer points of a healthy diet to customers at Jake's Organic.

Appears in: *Truth or Dare, Dare Me, Daring Young Man, Dare to Dream, Daringly Delicious*; briefly alluded to in *Daring Hearts*.

Jake Marbury, Sr.

One of Dareville's favorite sons, Jake is one of our town's most respected and loved businessmen. The proprietor of Jake's Organic, Jake is an active volunteer around town and always ready to lend his services and products for charity drives and benefits. You'll find him driving to work every day in his trusty pick-up with a friendly smile, and he has absolutely no plans to retire.

Appears in: *Truth or Dare, Dare Me, Daring Young Man, Dare to Dream, Daringly Delicious*; briefly alluded to in *Daring Hearts* and *InDarePendance Day*.

Claire Walker

"Local girl makes good." That's what everybody said when Claire Walker left Dareville for New York City and a career as a high-powered attorney. These days, though, we find she's more attracted to the quiet life she couldn't wait to escape. Will her next visit become a permanent stay?

Appears in: *Truth or Dare, Daring Young Man, Dare to Dream*; mentioned in *Dare Me*.

J.J. Marbury

J.J. has a big heart and big ideas, but both are the perfect size for small-town living. J.J. likes to claim he knows Dareville like the back of his hand, and it must be true since he's the top real estate agent in town. Tell him what you want in a home, and he'll go the extra mile to get it for you.

Appears in *Daring Young Man, Dare to Dream*.

Kate Robeson

Lively and lovely, Kate just might challenge J.J. for the "Knowing Dareville" title. Kate is the foremost expert on Dareville's history and curator of Dare House. There isn't anything Kate doesn't know about Dareville's founding, the fascinating Dare family or their bloodthirsty feud with the Wynns. Go ahead, try to stump her.

Appears in *A Winter's Dare, Dare to Dream, The Dares That Bind*.

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Redding Marbury

Publisher of the *Dareville Shopper*, Red loves words and is finally starting to love life again. Surrounded by friends and family, he's there with a helping hand and is learning a few things about accepting help as well.

Appears in *Daring Young Man*, *Dare to Dream*, *A Daring Twist*, *InDarePence Day*

Jared Wilton

Jared Wilton - Jared is new to Dareville, having come from New York City to freelance in Web design and PR. He enjoys the scenery, and in particular one special person in the foreground...

Appears in *Truth or Dare*, *Dare to Dream*, *InDarePence Day*

Marlene Robeson

A talent with numbers and fiercely protective of family, Marlene sometimes allows her passions and beliefs to restrain her judgment. Nursing the wounds left following her longtime husband's desertion, Marlene seeks comfort in her work, always hopeful for the day her reserves will melt and she can find love again.

Appears in *Daring Young Man*, *The Dares That Bind*; briefly alluded to in *Dare to Dream*

Dominic Petrocelli

Need a lift? Now you can arrive anywhere in the greater Dareville area in style with Big Apple Limousine. Proprietor Dom Petrocelli lends his own sense of big city elegance to his fleet of town cars and stretch limos. If he likes you, and chances are he will, he'll strike you a deal.

Appears in *Dare to Dream*, *Daringly Delicious*.

Rob Petrocelli

Dom's son Robbie is eager to help the family business succeed, but it seems lately he's more interested in a family of his own. He's smitten with a particular lady and determined to make her his, even if it means breaking a few rules for that to happen.

Appears in *Dare to Dream*, *Daringly Delicious*.

Lupe Santiago

Indispensible and dependable. That's how people would describe this South American beauty who types with the speed of a cheetah and speaks several languages. Once an international secretary for a New York firm, Lupe is now content with a quieter, small town life as receptionist for Big Apple Limo. Smaller towns are great places to hide secrets.

Appears in *Dare to Dream, Daringly Delicious*.

Lola Santiago

Where Lupe is reserved and professional, younger sister Lola is a colorful tornado. Wild and uninhibited, Lola can't understand why Lupe doesn't want to live life to the fullest as she does. Her definition, of course, involves lots of sex. It will take quite a man to tame this beauty.

Appears in *Dare to Dream, Daringly Delicious*.

Semi-Regulars

Devon Williams

While not a resident of Dareville, Devon is a frequent visitor. A history student at Hampton University, Devon can be seen mostly at Dare House researching the family's involvement in the Civil War. However, we think he might be there to spend as much time studying the pretty curator...

Appears in *A Winter's Dare*.

Tish Richmond

Tish is your go-to gal for a chocolate fix! Founder of Tish's Riches, Tish uses her gourmet skills to tempt chocolate lovers all over the country with succulent truffles that are simply to die for! You can order these fine artisan candies online or get them at Jake's, or at Tish's first shop opening soon in the historic downtown district.

Appears in *Daringly Delicious*; alluded to in *Daring Hearts*.

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Vinnie Petrocelli

Head mechanic at Big Apple Limo, Vinnie is skilled with his hands in more ways than one. When he's not rotating tires or polishing fenders, he's polishing off a few truffles to satisfy his sweet tooth. He doesn't worry about getting fat, though. It's fun to burn calories.

Appears in *Daringly Delicious*.

Victoria Robeson

An aspiring writer, Kate Robeson's younger sister doesn't have much of a life beyond her job and what free time she has for her words. One night with a mysterious, handsome man, however, changes her life completely. The young woman who once wallowed in self-doubt now lives in eternal Spring.

Appears in *The Dares That Bind*.

Alton Weiss

It's the successful man who knows immediately what he wants, and wastes no time getting it. Alton is a frequent visitor to Dareville for business and pleasure, and enjoys both with equal zest.

Appears in *The Dares That Bind*.

Charlene Marbury

A native of Dareville, Charlene is a loving wife and mother to two beautiful daughters. Looks, however, can be deceiving, and by all accounts she should have a happy life. It takes an awkward revelation at the wrong moment to release months, perhaps years, of heartache. With the healing love of friends and family, Charlene hopes for her happy ending.

Appears in *Dare to Dream*; mentioned in *Daring Young Man*, *A Daring Twist*, *InDarePendence Day*.

Carole Douglas

A native of Dareville, Carole works for *The Dareville Shopper*. Much as she loves the small town life, there are occasions when she yearns to get wild and have some adult fun.

Appears in *Where Angels Dare to Tread*.

Bella Reeve

New to town, Bella comes to Dareville for the Black Rose Festival and a Brady Garriston show, but decides to stay on for more appealing scenery.

Appears in *Where Angels Dare to Tread*.

Other Characters of Note

Cindy Marbury – Late wife of Jake Marbury, Sr. Seen in flashbacks in *Daring Young Man* and alluded to in *Truth or Dare*, *Dare Me* and *Dare to Dream*.

Polly Dare – Spinster heiress of the Dare family property in the Reconstruction Era. Seen in ghostly form in *A Winter's Dare*.

Athena – House servant of the Dare family in the 19th century. Seen in ghostly form in *A Winter's Dare*.

Chet Robeson – Father of Kate and Victoria, former husband of Marlene. Mentioned in *Daring Young Man* and *The Dares That Bind*.

Kerry Franklin – Toll collector, friend of Victoria's. Appears in *The Dares That Bind*.

Neil Randall – Musician, friend of Cal Briscoe. Appears in *Dulce*.

Candy – Waitress in a Venezuelan restaurant. Appears in *Dulce*.

Chelsea – Internationally renowned jazz singer. Appears in *Dulce*, mentioned in *Truth or Dare*.

Gil – The Grim Reaper. Appears in *Don't Dare the Reaper*.

Part Two

Dareville in Print

All Dareville titles are available in eBook format, with select works available in trade paperback. Here follows synopses of each title in the order they were published, which is not necessarily the chronological order (see Part Three). This section also excludes free works, which are presented later in their entirety in this book.

Truth or Dare

Published December, 2004; Second Edition, 2009

Dare you let the truth get in the way of love? Rock and roll legend Brady Garriston is in a slump, career-wise and in his love life. He is desperate for a comeback (and a “come” back), and finds a possible solution in masquerading in small town Dareville, where he can clear the slate and start fresh. Brady finds his muse in the lovely and uninhibited school teacher Ellie Shaw, and soon the two are making more than just beautiful music together. But will Brady’s deception bring on a sour note to their relationship? And what of the secret Ellie is keeping from Brady?

Dare Me

Published July, 2005; Second Edition, 2009

Studio musician Cal Briscoe has it bad for his best friend’s girl, and when Brady Garriston announces his engagement, Cal realizes he will never have a chance with the lovely and exciting Ellie Shaw. Losing interest in his work and discouraged with his love life, he decides to leave the city behind...and hopefully his feelings for Ellie. He accepts Brady’s offer of use of the Garriston/Shaw home in Dareville, and is shocked to discover one amenity...Ellie’s friend Sue Carmichael. Seems Ellie neglected to mention that she had allowed Sue to stay there, too!

Cal and Sue are the Odd Couple of Dareville, dancing on each other's nerves as they try to make the best of the situation. But how long will it be before Sue and Cal kill each other...or wind up in bed?

Dulce

Published August, 2006

When musician Neil Randall rolls into Caracas at three in the morning, it is with the intent to commit wanton acts of kindness until he can barely mount his motorcycle again. That the lovely and legendary singer Chelsea is in town further inflames his desires to get back at his ex for her infidelity.

Yet a chance encounter in a hotel hot tub with a lovely young expatriate throws Neil for a loop. Suddenly he is torn between leaving a girl in every port and leaving the port with this girl. Are Neil's feelings for the one everybody calls "Dulce" genuine, or is he fooling himself?

Note: While not an official Dareville title, *Dulce* alludes to the Dareville universe and is therefore included.

Double Dare

Published September, 2006

Vegas just got a bit more daring.

They say what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas, but when the newly wed Garristons and Briscoes get together to kick off a joint honeymoon, it becomes a sexual adventure that takes them all over Sin City, and each other! Join Brady and Ellie and Cal and Sue for the wedding, and wedding night, of the year.

A Winter's Dare

Published December, 2006

Holed up in Dare House Museum, Kate Robeson is content to live with the ghosts of the past. Finding a man can wait, much to her mother's consternation. Yet, when Kate discovers the ghosts haunting the oldest house in Dareville have their own plans for Kate, she quickly reconsiders her solitary position, and yearns for the missionary one!

When Devon Williams happens upon Dare House for a research project, Kate is instantly struck. The secrets he reveals of his connection to Polly Dare and her servant Athena are shocking, yet with

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a little push from some otherworldly friends, Kate comes to see that all work and no play makes for a dull winter, indeed.

Daring Young Man
Published June, 2007

Having weathered a bad marriage, Lauren McKenna is ready for a meaningful, loving relationship. Not with just anybody, either...she's set her sights, and her heart, on Dareville's favorite grocer, Jake Marbury—a man nearly twice her age.

It's been a year since Jake lost his wife to cancer, and he is hardly interested in starting over with a new love. Despite pressure from family and friends to retire, Jake is happy running the store, and looking forward to expanding to a new location. The need for help inadvertently leads him to Lauren, who takes the opportunity to win Jake.

Can Lauren convince the silver fox with the heart of gold that he's not too old to love again? Will Jake be able to find more to fill his heart than work?

Daringly Delicious
Published September, 2008

When it comes to chocolate, Tish Richmond delivers the goods. Her home business, Tish's Dishes, is booming, and a new contract with Dareville's popular grocery store allows her the opportunity to expand her reach. Happy as she should be for the exposure, Tish longs to stop her waistline from expanding further so love can reach her.

Gorgeous Vinnie comes to Dareville to work for his uncle's limousine company. One look at Tish and he's struck by the sexy, voluptuous entrepreneur. Can he convince Tish that the size of her dishes don't matter to him, and will she let him satisfy his sweet tooth?

Appears in the anthology, More, More, More!, from Phaze Books.

Dare to Dream
Published November, 2008

An act of pure humiliation drives Claire Walker from the big city to her native Dareville, and a tearful reunion with family and friends. Everyone is overjoyed to see the prodigal daughter return, and Claire contemplates making the visit permanent, but there's just one score to settle.

J.J. Marbury never stopped loving his high school sweetheart. Seeing Claire again after nearly fifteen years sets his passion to overdrive, and he's determined to make sure that Claire doesn't leave again.

Can a love lying dormant be revived? Will Claire find the closure she needs in her personal and professional lives so she can start over? Is there room for J.J. in this future?

Welcome back to Dareville, the little town that proves Virginia is for romance lovers.

The Dares That Bind
Published April, 2009

Victoria Robeson is content to live at home and work her dead-end job, despite dealing with her overbearing mother, just as long as she has time to write. When she meets the handsome and mysterious Alton Weiss as Dareville prepares for Brady Garriston's big concert, Vic is unnerved and intrigued by how well he knows her personality and desires.

Alton introduces her to a world of sensuality and submission, encouraging her to become a new woman. But is Alton merely a weekend distraction, or the promise of a better life?

Don't Dare the Reaper
Published September, 2009

En route to a sexy Halloween soiree, Cal and Sue Briscoe are involved in a car accident and die...or do they?

Stranded between layers of the veil, they cling to each other with the hope that whatever happens, they will stay together. As the Grim Reaper—a handsome fellow introducing himself as Gil—tries to discern their fate, the Briscoes take advantage of the moment out of time to celebrate what could be their last chance for love...or the beginning of a new life.

Where Angels Dare to Tread
Published October, 2009 (DLP Books)

October's Black Rose Festival comes to Dareville, along with a sexy party Carole Douglas can't wait to attend. While she hopes to catch more than a few interested looks with her skimpy angel costume,

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meeting the enchanting Bella Reeve has her ready to turn in her halo.
Will the town's first Vamp Ball bring her love at first "bite"?

Part Three

Dareville's Timeline

The most important thing to note when reading the Dareville books is that the events in each story are either concurrent with or consecutive to other stories in the series. For example, *Truth or Dare* is set in the spring of 2005, with events running through late spring/early summer. Its sequel *Dare Me*, takes up right after the event in the end of the first book. As of this writing, the timeline of the Dareville stories (excluding free stories) so far ends in the spring of 2006 with *Daringly Delicious*.

For the reader who prefers to read books in chronological order, here is the current line-up for Dareville (excluding the free stories):

Truth or Dare
The Dares That Bind
Dare Me
Double Dare
Dulce
Daring Young Man
Dare to Dream
Daringly Delicious
A Winter's Dare
Where Angels Dare to Tread
Don't Dare the Reaper

Part Four
Dareville After Dark

Over the years I've offered a few free short stories set in the Dareville universe. Many have coincided with different publisher promotions or holiday specials. All shorts are available on my website in PDF format, and are included here as well for your reading enjoyment.

A Daring Kiss

“*Look up.*”

Sue Briscoe darted her gaze upward and a smile split her features. Taped to the top of the doorway dividing the living room and kitchen was a tiny sprig of mistletoe. Quite small, too, as she would have missed it completely had not her husband Cal corralled her in the threshold.

“Why, Cal Briscoe,” she drawled, teasing, “I never pegged you for a sentimental soul.”

Cal chuckled and drew his wife into a tighter embrace. “I like to keep you guessing.”

“I’ll say.” She peered past his shoulder and fought to suppress a laugh at the unusual holiday decor of their living room. Three weeks in, and the sight of the half-Christmas tree taking up one corner continued to bring a flutter to her stomach. She’d been well aware of her husband’s upbringing—born of one Christian and one Jewish parent—and it only made sense Cal would express his heritage in a humorous way.

The half-menorah, situated on the coffee table, looked ready to teeter from the weight of its candles. Sue still marveled at its structure.

“Yet,” she said aloud, “this mistletoe is whole.” Miniature yet grandly pungent for its size, Sue inhaled the

musky outdoor scent and searched for any sign of such tampering.

"It better be, for what I paid for it," Cal muttered, and Sue playfully jabbed in the ribs.

"Well, I think it's sweet. And, underused, wouldn't you say?"

Like they needed mistletoe to kiss. Several months after the wedding, the honeymoon continued, with every room of the new house being christened. And rechristened. Still, Sue was a sucker for Christmas traditions, and looked forward to celebrating her first with Cal. She couldn't wait to observe favorite rituals, and create new ones.

She closed her eyes and puckered, and waited. When no lips brushed against hers, when she felt no rough patch of five o'clock shadow deliciously scrape her cheeks, she pried one eye open. Cal leaned back, watching her with fascination.

"What?"

He shook his head and smiled. "It's not that kind of mistletoe," he said.

"Oh? I wasn't aware there was a different genus or species. So, what kind of mistletoe is this? Do we shake hands instead?"

"I hope not. Otherwise I'm taking it back. No, for this kind of mistletoe you do something very different," Cal said, sinking to his knees. "Something I think you'll like more."

It certainly looked promising, Cal on his knees and playing with the zipper of her jeans. She braced her stance and wriggled in time to his ministrations so the denim slipped effortlessly over her hips and down her legs. The lace thong she wore proved no inconvenience for Cal as he wiped the transparent patch away to reveal her shaved pussy.

Stepping out of the jeans, she grasped the jamb and braced for impact. Cal traced a finger up and down her

inner labia. A gust of hot breath sent shivers across her skin and she twitched, feeling the moisture slicking up her pussy.

“Merry Christmas,” Cal said, and devoured her whole. His lips clamped over her pussy, he attacked her with his tongue. Broad, flat strokes swiped up her pussy lips, encouraging her to part so he could reach her clit. Sue felt her knees threaten to buckle. The sensation of Cal’s nether kiss ignited a fire bound to consume her.

Her nipples tingled under her shirt, but she didn’t dare let go of the jamb to pinch some relief into them. Spreading her thighs wider, she granted Cal deeper access, crying out as his tongue plunged into her slit to drink from her. Then he was back at her clit, tapping it rapidly and groaning his approval of her taste.

The orgasm stewing inside her grew too big for her balance. The shockwave hit and sent her rocking on her heels, but Cal clamped a hand to her backside and kept her standing as he continued to lick her. Wave upon wave shot upward and lit her skin. She felt brighter than the half-tree blinking behind them.

When finally the pleasure fire faded Cal fell backward with a gasp, rubbing his spine against the other jamb. “I love you, babe,” he said, catching his breath. Sue could no longer keep her strength and crumpled to the floor beside him.

“I love you, too.”

Cal pointed to the ceiling. “And,” he added, “we are never taking that thing down.”

Daring Hearts

Brady Garriston settled on the couch opposite his best friend, Cal Briscoe, and nursed his after-dinner cocktail. He let the dwindling ice cubes swirl and clink together in the golden amber Scotch before savoring a sip. “Dinner was fantastic, as usual,” he complimented the chef—Cal’s wife Sue—as she joined them. “What’s for dessert?”

“Don’t you mean *who*?” came a playful retort from behind him. Brady’s wife, Ellie, leaned down to drape her arms about his neck. She planted a gentle kiss on his neck and purred laughingly as he reached back to press her into him.

The foursome had enjoyed a delicious pasta dinner with a bottle of Viognier from the local vineyard. Yet with it being Valentine’s Day, all present knew the night was far from over. Despite having just eaten, appetites stood far from sated. Ever since their double wedding—to be exact, their no-holds-barred double wedding night in a limo circling the Las Vegas strip—the two couples continued to enjoy sexually charged play sessions. This holiday for lovers promised another eventful night of lovemaking, and Brady could feel the anticipation crackling in the air.

Sue Briscoe had in her hand a thin, red box, soft as velvet and tied with a wide, ornate ribbon. “I did get a cheesecake from Jake’s,” she said, “but as I was leaving Lauren handed me this box of truffles. Said they were too good to resist.”

Brady set his drink down, then leaned over to study the box as Sue squeezed in between the two men. A challenging task to pay attention, as the low cut blouse Sue wore provided a more enticing view than the package. Now, those creamy breasts could melt in his mouth as easily as any confection.

He recognized the Tish’s Riches logo, embossed in gold leaf on the lid. “I wouldn’t doubt that,” he agreed, and settled back to allow Ellie to take a seat on his lap. The local chocolatier made excellent concoctions. “Break ‘em open.”

“Dibs on coconut,” Cal called, helping Sue with the ribbon and receiving a slap for his eagerness.

“Is coconut even kosher?” Sue chided.

Cal shot her his patented evil grin. "I've eaten a lot of things that weren't." His voice rumbled low, and Brady could sense the affect on Ellie from the way the skin on her bare arms prickled.

That earned a second slap, to which Cal responded with a sudden searing kiss on Sue's parted lips. Brady rescued the box of chocolates just as they appeared ready to tumble from her loosening grip.

"Oh-kay, what do we have here?" Brady peeled away the top paper layer to reveal twelve round truffles, each an inch in circumference and individually decorated with a tiny valentine. The different colors used for the hearts promised a dozen different, tempting flavors.

A small slip of paper provided the key to decipher the bon-bons. "Here you go, buddy." Brady plucked a corner dark chocolate candy bearing a white heart. "Coconut. And for Ellie...what's that?"

Cal already had broken into the candy shell and scraped a sliver of chocolate from the corner of his mouth. "Whah's wha?" he asked around the bite.

"There's a picture in the wrapper where your truffle was."

Three heads now bent close to Brady to see. Sure enough, lining the bottom of the brown, ridged paper cup was an image of a woman's bare breasts, cut in a circle to fit. Even though the picture was small, the bust on display looked just as mouth-watering as the candy that hid it.

Ellie let out a loud chuckle. "Methinks Tish really has the Valentine theme nailed down with this truffle selection."

"Sure, if you're giving candy to a guy, or a lesbian," Sue said, laughing in kind. "But this isn't Tish's style..." her voice turned quiet and suspicious, "and Lauren's the one who gave me the box."

Cal licked the remains of the truffle from his fingers. "You sure this box was meant for us? Maybe she's getting dirty pics taken of her again, and this was really Jake's gift?"

That theory brought more laughter, all around, then a negative consensus. "No," Sue shook her head, "she was adamant about giving me this, for free."

Ellie, as though wanting a surprise, didn't peek at the key as she selected a blue-topped candy. "Wonder what goodie I'll get, and what flavor this is." The candy cup revealed a small photo of an erect cock, sheathed by a pair of cherry-red lips.

"Whoa! Please tell me that's not Jake," Cal said. Brady's laughter shook the box.

“No,” he said, and pinched the photo so that he could lift it free. “These are magazine clippings. Looks like Lauren sent you home with something extra sweet.” He winked at a smirking Sue.

“Actually,” Ellie held forward the half-eaten truffle to reveal its orange filling, “it looks to me she’s provided us with some kind of visual guide to Valentine’s Day.”

Her free hand snaked under the box, in between her husband’s legs. She cupped his semi-hard erection and fondled his balls through his gabardine slacks. “It’s like some kind of sexual Advent calendar,” she explained. “You pick a candy, you do what you see.”

Brady smiled and eased the box to Sue’s knees. “I most certainly see,” he nodded, and edged his ass forward on the sofa so Ellie could have better access to his bulge. He let a quiet groan escape as Ellie worked his cock free from his now open fly. Popping the remainder of the truffle in her mouth, Ellie chewed quickly before lowering to capture the reddening tip between her lips.

Brady hummed, satisfied at first contact. “I’m starting to gain an appreciation for fine, artisan chocolate.” A side glance to his friends told Brady that Cal had quickly caught on to his visual instructions. Part of Sue’s blouse was pushed aside, exposing one breast which Cal nibbled and sucked.

“Your turn.” Brady nudged Sue.

Sue undid her blouse the rest of the way and pinched the unattended nipple. “Pink’s never let me down,” she said, and selected the corresponding bon-bon. The picture in the cup presented a clear shot of a shaved, spread pussy.

“Nice. Now I can’t decide what to eat first.” Sue looked at the candy in her hand, then at Ellie. The unspoken communication between them prompted the latter’s release from Brady’s cock. Ordinarily he would have expressed disappointment, but the night was young and he had the candy box now. The added bonus of watching Sue lick his lovely wife’s pussy further stoked the fires within.

Ellie shucked her slacks and thong and lay back on the carpet, knees high and elbows propping her upper body. Once Sue extricated herself from Cal’s oral hold, she slid to the ground and crawled between Ellie legs. She fingered Ellie’s pussy lips, as though to encourage her juices to flow, then eased the rounded tip of the truffle into Ellie’s slit.

The candy still in place, Sue kissed the top of Ellie’s clitoral hood, then pried the folds apart with her tongue and licked. The truffle burrowed deeper into Ellie until Sue finally removed it and took a bite.

“Mmm, caramel and sea salt. Lauren’s done her homework.” Sue grinned, then buried her face again into Ellie’s nether lips.

Brady selected a truffle bearing a green heart, expecting perhaps mint filling. The bonus treat unearthed was another hard-on.

“Interesting.” No lips, no toys, no map included. Did the cock represent his own, or Cal’s?

He looked at his friend, whose jeans and underwear now pooled around his ankles. His cock stood at attention, wavering only slightly as Cal fingered the base.

Brady bit into the candy. Yep, mint. Good enough to flavor a kiss, which he obliged for Cal. Tongues mated and twirled around each other, and Brady felt the tip of Cal’s shaft brush his hand. “What do you think?” he asked when they broke free.

“I think you should use yours on me,” Cal said and kicked off his shoes.

Brady set down the box and crossed the living room to his hanging jacket for a condom and the trial-sized bottle of lube he’d brought. Cal readied himself by stripping completely nude and sinking to the floor, leaning on the couch and presenting himself for Brady. All the while Sue continued to eat Ellie, jamming two fingers in and out of her slit as she did so.

Oiling a forefinger, Brady readied Cal’s anus while his free hand sought the truffle box. He plucked a red-hearted ball to reveal another pussy, then tossed it at Ellie’s head. “You owe her one, too,” he said.

The ladies got the message. Sue rose only briefly to reposition herself so they could sixty-nine. By then, Brady had his pants down and the condom fastened. He rubbed the tip against Cal’s hole, encouraging him to widen so he could slip past the outer ring. It wasn’t long before he could fully seat himself.

“God, that feels so good,” Cal said on a groan, and pushed his ass into Brady to direct the movement. He reared his head back in an apparent attempt to reach Brady for a kiss. After one hard pump of his cock, Brady leaned forward so they could brush lips.

“Alright, I’m ready for seconds.” Cal kept one arm braced on the couch while the other searched the truffle box. The paper cup of the orange-heart confection stuck to the bottom, and Cal had to shake loose the picture to see something fleshy and pink Brady couldn’t quite make out.

“What is it?”

“Looks like a backside,” Cal murmured, grunting with each thrust of Brady’s cock inside him. In the backdrop the keening cry of Ellie’s

climax disrupted them, and Brady turned in time to see Sue collapse on top of his wife.

"Baby." Cal crooked his neck, beckoning his wife closer. "Get your back...back here." He rose slightly so Sue could kneel on the couch, her ass to his face. Curving her back so her buttocks raised high, she leaned over the sofa and let out a satisfied moan when Cal's tongue delved into her cheeks. She used one hand to pry them apart so he could have better access for rimming her.

Ellie came behind a thrusting Brady and kissed her shoulder. "So where do I go now?" she pouted, close enough for Brady to smell Sue's tempting musk on her.

"Do what the candy says," he said. "You know, sex is like a box of chocolates..."

"I know. Full of gooey stuff and nuts," Ellie finished. "Speaking of which..."

She snatched the candy decoder and glanced at it, then grabbed the brown-heart bon-bon from the box. Biting it open, she showed Brady the non-eaten half and the accompanying picture of a man's scrotum. "Almond joyful," she bragged. "If you'll excuse me..."

Brady nudged Cal's legs, and both men spread wide enough so Ellie could slide underneath him. Lying on her back, she raised her head high enough to take Cal's swaying balls into her mouth.

"Fuck, yes!" Cal hissed before returning to pleasuring his wife. Sue jostled on the cushions, rubbing her clit furiously and mewling the onset of a coming orgasm.

"That's it, babe," Brady told her. He wasn't far behind. His own balls tightened, the first sign of impending release. Ellie's reach toward his sac as he continued to slam into Cal's ass served only to speed along the inevitable.

"Shit, I'm gonna come." Soon as the words were out of his mouth, though, Brady did just that. It started with a fire in the pit of his groin that exploded through every nerve ending in his body—he felt as if he could come forever. When the sensation passed he fell limp against his friend, lightly feathering kisses down Cal's spine.

Cal twitched around him, prolonging the ecstasy a bit, but soon Brady sensed Cal's rough departure.

"Sorry, bud, I can't hold it much longer. Screw the candy." Cal wrenched free of Ellie and Brady, turned Sue around and lay her on the couch. The candy box overturned in the melee, and Cal leaped on top of his lady love. With one bold thrust he was inside her, seating his cock deep into her pussy.

Sue gasped and arched in her supine position. “God, I love you,” she cried. More than likely Cal was the one she addressed, but Brady knew their feelings transcended their marriages. They all loved each other, and Valentine’s Day had given them another opportunity to share their passions.

That, and a box of candy. The remaining bon-bons lay scattered on the carpet, separated from their paper cups.

Brady picked up a photo of a cock embedded in a pussy. He grinned at his wife. “Here’s one to try. What do you say?”

Ellie cupped his balls and massaged him to another erection. “I say, I can’t wait until Easter.”

A Daring Twist

“Some people claim that there’s a *whoaaaaaaa-mon* to blaaaaame...and I know! Oh, yeah, I know, baby!”

Clearly drunk out of his gourd, the singer of this rollicking karaoke version of “Margaritaville”—the fifteenth such rendition delivered so far at Mick’s Cinco de Mayo celebration—punctuated the song’s bridge with an awkward shake of his skinny ass. So lost was he in the rhythm that he missed his cue for the final line.

“Shit!” The ad-libbed expletive shot piercing feedback through all speakers, causing a collective wince through the crowd. “It’s my own da-yum fault!”

Mick Swanson, bar owner and quasi-celebrity host of the bar’s annual “Parrothead Idol” contest, didn’t wait for the song to finish before relieving the blue Hawaiian-shirted contestant of his microphone. “It most certainly is, bud.” To the crowd, “Let’s give it up for Robbie ‘Margaritaville’ Mack. Rob-bie!”

A smattering of applause followed, low enough for Redding Marbury to hear the muttered aside to his right.

“Robbie sounds like *he* should give it up and go back to driving trucks or whatever.”

Red snickered into his own margarita at that, careful not to suck any of the tart liquid down the wrong pipe. After a sip, he leaned to the side and replied, “I wouldn’t worry, you heard the crowd reaction. I doubt the needle on the Applause-O-Meter moved an inch.”

“If there is one. This whole thing is fixed, I’ll bet. You know Mick’s gonna give it to the girl with the huge tits.”

“Yeah, and maybe he’ll give her the prize money, too,” Red cracked. This earned an equally riotous response, and when his barstool neighbor’s drink moved into his line of vision Red realized the guy wanted to toast the lame joke.

That’s when he turned and locked eyes with a beautiful, dark-haired man. Really, *beautiful* could be the only word to describe him—the way the jagged tips of his hair dusted his t-shirt collar, soft brown eyes that looked as though they could ripple like puddles if touched, and pouting full lips. Hispanic in origin he had to be, guessing by his

features. Red took in his strong, bare arms and flawless latte-colored skin and hesitated before speaking. Whoever the young man was, he'd taken Red off his guard.

"Cheers," he mumbled, clinking his glass against the proffered longneck Bud.

"*Vive Dareville.*" The man took a long pull from his beer bottle and slammed it on a damp coaster. "Miguel Guererro," he said, his voice crisp as he extended his hand.

Red accepted his warm, strong grip. His pulse quickened a beat and he suddenly felt flush. "Red Marbury. You local? I haven't seen you around town." Indeed, as the owner of Dareville's only newspaper, he knew practically everybody.

Miguel shook his head. "Passing through," he said. "I heard about the karaoke contest and thought I'd take my chances." A mischievous smile curled those tempting lips. "You sing?"

"Hell, no." Red fidgeted in his stool. The rising heat of Miguel's appraisal sparked a self-consciousness he wanted to overcome. Every day since he and his wife Charlene had decided to open their marriage to accommodate new lovers—largely to satisfy Red's homosexual yearnings—Red wondered if each look, each perceived blink equaled an innuendo.

Tonight, with their daughters spending the evening at Charlene's parents' house, his wife likely suffered similar jitters on her dinner date with a co-worker she liked. Charlene had encouraged Red to use this opportunity to explore the attractions he had repressed over the years, and he actually went to a gay bar at the beach. Fear, however, got the better of him, forcing him to take refuge in the familiar atmosphere of Mick's annual Cinco de Mayo bash.

What could he possibly say to another man in a gay bar, anyway? He had no experience in the meat market, gay or straight. He and Charlene had dated all through high school and married shortly afterward. How could a man unable to correctly discern a silent come-on from a blink to get rid of dust succeed in the dating game?

The shrieking coda of an off-key blonde in a bikini top and shorts—shining strands of red, white, and green beads hanging from her neck—interrupted Red's woes. The tanned, tilting beauty had just asked the audience, "Which way do I steer?" as the final strains of "Cheeseburger in Paradise" faded. Mick took her mic and escorted her off-stage.

"Which way to steer? How about toward rehab, or voice lessons?" Mick joked, though Red figured there was some degree of stern

sincerity in the remark. But the crowd laughed anyway and light applause signaled a dismal effort for the contestant.

Clearly the host tired of the event. Mick's voice reflected his weariness. "Okay, last but not least..." he consulted an index card, "here to sing—oh, thank God it's something we haven't done yet."

"That's what she said!" roared a detached voice from the crowd.

Mick quickly rejoined with, "Thank you, sweetheart. You better head back to the balcony now. I hear Statler's getting worried."

Nobody laughed at that, not even Miguel. Feeling it his duty, Red crooked his neck toward the stage. "*The Muppet Show*," he said. "You know, those two old guys who heckled everybody..."

"Oh, right. Right." Miguel nodded and smiled, and Red realized that show must have aired when the young man was but a babe, or long before that. God, he was too old to start over. He should be home with his wife and kids.

Then again, that wouldn't be fair to Charlene. He couldn't give her what she really wanted out of their marriage.

Mick continued to ramble on with the final introduction. "Okay, kids. Three more minutes and it's all over. Let's bring out Miguel Guerro. Miguel!"

Miguel slid his nearly empty bottle next to Red's drink and pushed loudly from his stool. "Watch that, please?" he asked with a gentle brush to Red's hand. The touch sparked an electric sensation that shocked Red's senses. The short hairs on the nape of his neck stood to attention—his cock was certain to follow.

"Miguel?" But the young man couldn't hear him. Red watched him sashay around bodies about to topple. That firm, delicious ass, encased in faded jeans, moved with the grace of a cat, and Red saw his shoulders flex and pull his t-shirt tighter across his back. He had a hard body—would it melt in a man's embrace?

Knock it off. Red knew nothing of "gaydar" or signals. For all he knew, Miguel was a horny college student who banged a different pussy every night.

What couldn't be denied, though, was Miguel's incredible singing voice. Deep tones overpowered the twangy melody of a Jimmy Buffett song Red didn't immediately place. Many of the karaoke contestants kept to the obvious hits about margaritas and cheeseburgers. Miguel's choice began slowly and teased the audience with its down-home raunchy exuberance. The words came naturally—when Miguel sang for a barmaid to bring another round, Red half expected one of Mick's shorts-clad ladies to join him on stage bearing a heavy tray.

It seemed as though Miguel scanned the crowd for a glimpse of him. Red detected laser heat aimed directly at him as their gazes locked from across the bar. His hearing numbed at the suggestion sung directly at him.

Honey, why don't we get drunk and screw?

Riotous whooping and cheers erupted in the pit near the stage. Shaking hands held aloft beer mugs and margarita glasses, sloshing alcohol everywhere. The tang of salt and yeast assaulted Red's senses and he grasped the brass rail lining the bar for balance. Miguel maintained control of his attentions, clearly knowing what Red himself had yet to admit out loud.

The boy knew about Red, knew he was interested. A subtle wink provided Red's answer of his own desires. Red's palm sweat against the railing and he slid a few inches before catching himself. Feet tucked around the posts of the stool, he turned back to the bar, breaking eye contact so he could finish his drink and plan his next move.

Out the door? Bodies thickened the easiest pathway there. Miguel would surely catch him, but Red knew he wanted that to happen.

Before he realized it, the song ended to a high-decibel reception, more cacophonous than any other contestant had received. "That's it, I'm calling it. The rest of you didn't come close," Mick bellowed. "This year's winner of Buffett Idol is Miguel Guererro!"

The crowd didn't seem to mind. The cheers continued long after the stage lights dimmed and canned music rose to fill the air. Red did his best to keep it all behind him but a forceful slap to his back brought the party crashing into his consciousness.

"Check it out," Miguel drawled, flipping open his prize envelope to reveal a check and a thick packet of gift certificates.

"Congratulations, you earned it," Red told him. "You were better than anybody else, that's for damn sure."

"You got that right." Miguel signaled the bartender over and tossed a bill on the counter. "I got his," his tapped Red's shoulder, "and gimme a bottle of Cuervo Gold for the road."

Red's heart thumped at the additional contact. He turned slightly to see Miguel's hand still palmed him. "You didn't have to do that, but thanks."

"You deserve something, too, friend." Miguel leaned over the bar and snatched a whole lime from the drink well. Grabbing a nearby salt shaker, he nudged Red to stand. "C'mon."

"Where are we going?" Red would have followed him over a cliff at this point, he realized. The boy was just too damn beautiful for his own good.

DAREVILLE AFTER DARK

Miguel grinned two rows of perfect white teeth. "It's Independence Day for my people, *amigo*. What's a holiday without some fireworks?"

* * * *

As the owner of the town paper, Red knew damn well Dareville had planned no such display for Cinco de Mayo. Townsfolk considered themselves lucky to see a show on the Fourth, given the council's reluctance to explode things within town limits. Red liked to believe, too, he possessed enough smarts to know he could expect a different type of "bang" in Miguel's room at the Dareville Inn.

The drive, following Miguel's pickup truck, proved mercifully short and devoid of many side streets to allow a timid escape. Red kept his breath held as they silently made their way to a second floor room. Blood pounded in Red's ears as numerous questions jarred his mind. What if Miguel turned out to be some kind of hustler, and mugged Red? Should he have called somebody to let them know where he was? Who to call, Charlene? Certainly not his father or brother. Maybe he should have let Mick in on his plans.

No, not Mick. Nobody was to know about this.

Besides, people talk, and Red didn't need the publicity.

Miguel casually tossed a ring of keys on the nearest table by the door and strolled to the desk on the opposite wall. He unloaded his booty on the paper blotter and reached for the mini-fridge. "Have a seat," he said. "Get comfy."

Seeing as Miguel had obviously rented the inn's economy suite, Red had no choice but to get "comfy" on the edge of the queen-sized bed. The mattress yielded easily to his weight, forcing Red to jostle for balance as he sank into the softness.

Miguel chuckled. "You are funny, Red. You know that?"

"Unintentionally," Red countered. "That's not always a good thing."

"It's cute. I like you." Miguel poured two shots of tequila, then sliced the lime into wedges with a jackknife from his pocket. "You could use something strong, too, I can tell."

Like an elephant tranquilizer? Red kept silent. He didn't want to come across as a comedian. True, humor often proved a strong shield during times of anxiety, but one false wrong might send the night into a disappointing tailspin.

And what did he expect to happen anyway? Sex? Teenaged style necking at the most? The amorous electric charge filled the room. Red

could feel the affect of Miguel's musk on his own skin. His cock stirred slowly to life, his nipples ached under his shirt...but he held fast to the bed comforter. Whatever was destined to happen tonight, he decided Miguel would take the lead. The young man exuded confidence, a casual nonchalance that Red envied. He needed to learn that.

Miguel grabbed the salt shaker and turned. "Hold out your hand," he ordered in a gentle voice. "No, like this." Miguel demonstrated a loose fist, thumb curled upward. Red obeyed.

Miguel sprinkled some salt along the rim of Red's fist. "You have to have done this some time in your life."

As opposed to what? Red had to admit, though, Miguel could read him well. Truly he must look the part of the shy virgin unsure if he was being seduced. Of course, Red was no virgin in the traditional sense—he and Charlene had enjoyed a strong sex life until these old desires resurfaced—yet he had never acted on the alternatives now apparently open to him.

With Red's knuckles now properly seasoned, Miguel took one of the hotel glasses, a fourth of the way filled with Cuervo. "Lick it." He bent down to tongue away the salt. Red thought his heart might burst.

Finishing with an exaggerated smack, Miguel said, "Slam it," and downed the shot.

Red understood what came next. No mistaking Miguel's grin, either.

"Suck it."

And Miguel drew Red closer for a searing kiss. Red loosened his jaw on a gasp and Miguel easily plundered the open cavern, probing deep and moving his lips over Red's. Red could only melt into this kiss, thinking how similar the sensation felt to kissing a woman...yet the hint of facial abrasion and scent of raw masculinity clearly defined this experience.

Red hoped it would last. But, just as his arms rose to bring Miguel closer the young man broke away with a satisfied smirk. The taste of tequila and salt lingered on Red's lips and he pursed tight to preserve the memory. He watched Miguel's gaze drop to Red's left hand, shocked when Miguel lifted it higher. Another grin.

"So, you're funny and naughty," Miguel teased. "What secrets are you hiding?" The charge confused Red, then he realized Miguel had noticed the obvious band of white at the base of his ring finger. Charlene had advised him to leave his wedding ring at home tonight, in the event. He supposed now it didn't make a damn bit of difference. To Miguel he typified the repressed husband on the prowl, taking whatever the little lady at home refused to give. Red's protective feelings for

Charlene compelled him to speak, even though he had no idea he'd see this guy again.

"There are no secrets to reveal, to the people who matter most to me," he said, his voice a strong whisper. "She knows, and understands."

Miguel's expression softened. "I don't mean to make you uncomfortable, Red..."

"You're not, I'm just naturally so." Red smiled, relieved to see Miguel respond in kind. "And as you can tell, my inexperience in all manners of seduction is plainly obvious."

"I think you just need to relax." Miguel handed him the other shot, but before Red could down the tequila Miguel tsked. "No, gotta do it the right way."

He sprinkled some salt on his own curled thumb, then held it up to Red's mouth. "You remember what to do?"

Yep.

Lick it. Miguel's skin felt slick and cool under his thickening tongue.

Slam it. The Cuervo ignited a line of fire down this throat, but Red did his best not to cough away the flames.

Suck it. The alcohol amplified Miguel's delicious taste. The kiss lasted longer this time, with Red surprising himself by taking the lead. He pinned a hand to the back of Miguel's head to prolong their bond, breathing deeply in time to his partner's growing interest.

Their bodies melded easily into each other's. Arms snaked around waists. Legs and thigh twined, and jockeyed slightly for balance. Not that Red minded—if they ended up a bruised heap on the hotel rug he wouldn't stop his exploration of Miguel's form. The longer they kissed, the more natural his reactions appeared. His fingers fanned over the back of Miguel's jeans, noting the curves and softness of his ass.

He touched a man's backside, and enjoyed it. He touched as though he had been meant to do for so long.

Miguel broke the kiss and nibbled down Red's neck. "I'm ready for another shot," he whispered, his breath hot in Red's ear. Red's cock stirred in answer. "How about you?"

He would have preferred to remain in place, but Miguel gave him no opportunity to protest. Miguel slipped free of his hold and poured two more shots of Cuervo.

But when Red held out his fist for the salt, the other man shook his head. "No, let's try something else." Rather than reach for the glasses, Miguel turned toward him and deftly unbuckled Red's belt.

Red swallowed. He knew to expect this eventuality, and the thought of seeing Miguel in similar stages of undress caused him to harden underneath his partner's gentle touch. By the time Miguel had the pants and boxers off, Red sported a full erection, the tip tender and aching.

Miguel took the shaker in hand and tapped a few granules into his cupped palm. With a wink, he sank to his knees and slid the salted hand over Red's cock. Red sucked in air, his legs quaking at first contact—a man rubbing his cock, a distant fantasy come to life—yet Miguel eased his anxiety with a whispered rebuke.

“Relax, Red.” Slowly he bent his head and kissed the purpling head. Red thought he might come right there, and thanked what restraint he possessed when Miguel came up without a coated face.

Miguel grinned. “Lick it.” The flat of his tongue pressed against the base of Red's cock, then drew oh so painfully upward to collect the tiny salt crystals stuck to his skin.

“God,” Red cried, and cuffed the edge of the mattress for support.

“Slam it.” Still kneeling, Miguel reached behind them for a glass. He downed the golden liquid in one swallow without so much a grimace for the sharp, fiery agave.

“Suck it.”

No pretense necessary. Miguel grasped the base of Red's cock firmly, letting one finger trail down his scrotum to tease a sensitive spot near his thigh. Red shifted his legs apart for better balance, and to allow Miguel more room as he guided the cock into his mouth. Red hissed at the gentle, wet suction trapping him, and twitched with every rogue movement of Miguel's tongue across his shaft. He arched his head back and closed his eyes to let the sensation enhance, but after a few seconds he had to look down and see, indeed, that a man had him in this incredible hold.

His wife Charlene enjoyed oral sex, giving and receiving, and as much as Red loved that special intimacy, it was nothing like this. Miguel possessed a talent that now served as the standard by which others would be judged.

This thought cast a shadow on the pleasure of the moment, and Red looked around the room. Hotels offered temporary housing, and this time with Miguel signaled just that. Red would come, perhaps they'd kiss and do other things, then he would go home. What next? Assuming Miguel went on his merry way, and Charlene ended up in a serious relationship with her dinner date, what was left for him?

When a hand snaked around his hip to cup his bare buttocks, any misgivings about this moment dissolved. Red directed all concentration on the gorgeous man before him, sucking him to imminent orgasm.

A finger burrowed deeper into his ass, tracing the puckered hole before breaching. “Yes,” Red said on a sigh. The buildup in his scrotum proved too much to bear. The tingling in his groin increased—he couldn’t hold on. “Gonna come.”

Miguel released Red’s cock long enough to encourage him to do so, then resumed a gentle suction, guiding Red over the edge. He exploded in short bursts, moaning with the added sensual pressure applied when Miguel closed tightly around him to swallow every last drop. Here, too, Red noticed the difference between Miguel and Charlene. Where his wife usually dodged his climax, preferring to stroke his orgasm into a tissue, Miguel devoured his essence with relish.

As the high faded, Red collapsed back on the bed, panting and pressing his heart to control its wild beat. “Holy shit,” he said, more from disbelief with the situation than the actual act. He’d come to a strange man’s hotel room for sex, not something he’d ordinarily do. He wasn’t drunk, yet never felt so intoxicated in his life. Were he not feeling so weak in the afterglow, he’d muster the courage to drag Miguel up next to him.

Yet, for all the euphoria he savored now, his thoughts still wandered to his wife. Though she knew to expect Red to have experienced something tonight, he realized they could not stay together and lead separate love lives. She needed companionship full-time, and he needed...this? Well, something similar to it. The occasional dinner out or clandestine blowjob would not satisfy either of them.

He watched Miguel down another shot, then creep beside him on the bed. Miguel draped an arm across Red’s chest. Red blinked in the sting of alcohol-tinged breath.

“That was awesome,” he said.

“Yes,” Red agreed, then, “What’s next for you?”

Miguel smiled and rolled onto his back. “Another town, another contest. This check will only get me so far.”

“You ought to audition for a steadier job with that voice. You could do very well.”

Miguel chuckled. “Nah, I don’t like to be pinned down. I’m having too much fun. And when I’m too old to do this I’ll at least have the memories.”

“I hear you.” Red counted pockmarks on the ceiling. “I envy your freedom.”

The mattress sagged and shifted. Miguel had eased farther away to grab a pillow. "I have to admit, too, I see people happy in their hometowns, surrounded by friends, and I get a longing. But I know if I'll stay I'll itch to leave again."

"Yes." Red had ties to Dareville, and the beach. Family, friends, a career. Would he be able to sustain it all in a new life? He worried about Charlene, but she was strong and capable, and beautiful. She would have no trouble finding a new man to share her life.

Would he?

A nudge to his shoulder broke his thoughts, and he turned to see Miguel smiling broadly at him. The young man leaned in for a kiss, and Red obliged. Slowly lips moved over skin, and tongues danced a lazy waltz until Miguel pursed his mouth and broke free.

Red sighed. "I can't stay."

"I know," Miguel said. "Neither can I." After a pause, he added, "If I came back, would you be here?"

Red nodded. He certainly didn't expect an invite to run away with Miguel, and in the slim chance it came he'd have to say no. "I just realized I didn't return the favor." Red trailed a cautious hand down Miguel's chest, ghosting over belt buckle to the crotch of his jeans, where a once pronounced erection had softened.

Miguel grasped the hand, lifted it to his lips and kissed the fingers. "Don't worry about it. Now I have reason to come back to town."

Red smiled. "I'll be here."

In-Dare-Pendence Day

Jared Wilton clutched the picnic basket and swung it gently from left to right, brushing the front of his jeans. Behind him in the distance, the activity of the town's Independence Day celebration roared to a lively drum beat and the echoed feedback of the night's entertainment. He wondered how much of the concert they had missed, and why his boyfriend had taken them to Dareville's only grocery store, rather than the site of the actual event.

He'd said nothing when Red parked the car in an employee's spot—his father owned the place, which had been closed today, so Red probably could get away with it. After what seemed like an hour as Red tested yet another key in the sliding door's lock, he spoke up.

"Did you forget something?" he asked. A cursory peek under the checkered cloth covering the basket revealed plenty of provisions for a pleasant Fourth of July evening: fried chicken and biscuits, cold beer, nacho chips, and citronella candles. Instinctively Jared patted his back pocket for the other item he'd secretly packed, hoping they might make good use of it and create their own fireworks later.

Red Marbury looked up from the tangle of keys in his hands and winked. "Only knowing which key opens this damn place. I think it's the blue one," he said, singling out a blue key with a triangular head. A sharp tug, then a twist to the left and Red gave a short cry of victory.

"We're going to miss the end of the concert," Jared needled, "and the beginning of the fireworks."

"No, we won't. We're going to have the best seats in the house." Red forced one of the automated doors open and motioned for Jared to remain still. "Let me disable the alarm real quick." With that he grabbed the rolled up flannel throw he'd set on the ground and disappeared.

"Fine." Jared sighed. At this rate, they'd be lucky to get a good parking spot, much less prime blanket space on the grass. As though acting in defiance, he edged closer to the door and savored the blast of air conditioning as he watched a line of traffic crawl down the main street toward the park. Along the sidewalk, families and couples toted folded lawn chairs and pulled wheeled coolers toward Dareville

Memorial Park. Occasionally a child would break rank to chase a firefly before being called back in time to cross the street. He sighed, thinking maybe they were better off parking here and walking. But how long would that take?

His first real holiday in Dareville...how he'd looked forward to celebrating it, and enjoying an old fashioned, small town festival. Having lived in a post 9/11 New York City, it seemed nearly every day was the Fourth of July, with streets lined with patriotic souvenir shops. Jared had loved the fast pace and endless activity, but the time spent here convinced him he could become a country mouse, provided a certain someone remained willing to share his cheese.

Cheese. Red had bemoaned earlier finding none in the fridge. Jared heard a faint "Thank you, good night!" from the direction of the park and cursed to himself. "Red, I think the concert's over!" he called into the store. "We have plenty of food, come on!"

"No, you come here." Red beckoned him into the store and Jared loped inside with a heavy grunt. Aside from a few small security lights positioned in the building's corners, Jake's Organic was dim. Jared relied on the lamppost light shining through the front picture windows to follow his boyfriend's shadowed figure as they headed toward the office. No sense asking what was needed there—if Red didn't act cooperative now, he wouldn't answer the question anyway.

Another door in Jake's office led to a dark staircase. Red took the steps two at a time without flipping the switch, encouraging Jared to hurry. "You're going to love this, I promise," he said.

"I better," Jared grumbled, squinting at the flash of moonlight exposed at the end of the line.

Red had opened a hatch leading to the roof. He stepped out first, then took the basket from Jared before fishing his boyfriend from the darkened depths. "Get a load of this view." He gestured broadly toward the east, and once Jared found his bearings he looked up to see the bright lights surrounding the main recreation area of Dareville Memorial Park. From this vantage, they could clearly view the stage where the concert had taken place, as well as legions of picnickers enjoying themselves and the canned music piped in through large speakers.

"They always shoot the rockets from behind the stage area," Red told him. "And they're always late, so we have plenty of time to get settled."

"Wow!" Jared relaxed and smiled at his boyfriend, and tried to brush away the brief pang of guilt that seized him. "This is really nice

of you to do this. I feel so bad for thinking we were going to miss the big finale—”

Red neared and planted a quick kiss on Jared’s parted lips. “Trust me, babe. The fireworks are only the beginning.”

“I like the sound of that.” Jared shifted in place, sensing his cock stir in his jeans. He helped Red set up the blanket and candles, then cracked open both beer bottles as Red distributed food on paper plates.

“Every year, after spending the Fourth on the beach, we all used to come up to the roof to watch the fireworks. It’s the best place to view them,” Red explained between bites of chicken. “Sometimes Dad would set up a small fire for toasting marshmallows, and we’d make s’mores.”

Jared noted the faraway look in Red’s eyes, made all the more mysterious in the yellow glow of the candles. He could almost picture two rowdy boys—young Redding and his brother J.J.—cavorting around the roof and pretending to teeter over the edge, worrying their parents.

“Last time we came up here, Charlene was pregnant with our first daughter.” Red’s voice took on a wistful tone. “She didn’t want to do it the next year, thought the baby might crawl right over and fall. We just got out of the habit after that.”

Jared looked down at his plate and set aside the remaining scraps and bones. Of course, staying in Dareville meant living with the ghosts of his lover’s past. Though Red and Charlene had split long before he came into the picture, a part of him wondered if Red regretted the decision to divorce her. Granted, Red had come to terms with his sexuality, but sometimes Jared wondered if Red might change his mind and wish to reconcile.

“I’m sorry,” Red blurted out suddenly, and drew Jared closer. The blanket wrinkled underneath him, but Jared didn’t care. The intoxicating scent of Red’s aftershave taunted him, and the closer he sat the more it masked the pungent odor of citronella.

He settled his head on Red’s shoulder, wanting to speak but uncertain of words to use. He opted instead to nuzzle Red’s neck and was happy to receive a light kiss in his hair in return.

“I didn’t mean to spoil the fun,” Red said.

“You didn’t, it’s fine.” Red had history here, he needed to accept it. “I like hearing about when you were younger.” How much of the lives of former loves had he learned? Little, if anything. Knowing Red’s past gave Jared confidence in their future.

“Well, maybe you’ll like this, too.”

Red reached into his back jeans pocket and pulled out a folded envelope, handing it to him. Jared smoothed out the papers within, but the lettering proved too small to read with the lack of good lighting.

"I don't want to put this near the candles, what is it?" he asked. Red aimed a small flashlight from the keychain over the document, and Jared clearly saw that he held Red's divorce decree.

"It's official, Jared. I'm a free man. Charlene is going to marry George this Christmas, and I...well, I suppose I won't be *free* depending on what you have planned."

Jared's hands trembled and he quickly handed back the papers. He didn't need to let go and send them flying through town, though it wouldn't invalidate the news he'd longed to hear. Red was wholly free to be with him now. They could make a life together and enjoy many more holidays together. Growing up as an only child of only children, there had been few opportunities for gatherings. That Red's father and brother accepted his choices, and Jared, caused his heart to swell with hope for the large family he always wanted.

"What about the girls?" Jared asked.

"Joint custody. You'll be seeing a lot of them, I hope."

"Me, too." He couldn't resist any longer. He leaned forward and kissed Red full on the lips. They remained seated side by side, mouths parted and tongues mating, through at least two songs blaring from the park. He touched Red's shoulder and trailed his fingers down his arm. When his lover reciprocated Jared shivered despite the dry, Virginia heat.

They broke away and Red whispered, "Love you so much. I don't know how I'd have gotten through these last few months without you." He looked down. "I just wish I could have done a better job of—"

"Don't." Jared cut him off with a finger to his lips. "I love you. You brought me here, that's something. Why don't we enjoy the view, and next year we'll continue our own traditions?"

"I'd like to start another one with you, if you're willing."

There was no mistaking the mischief in Red's smile. Before Jared could reply, Red had him on his back and staring at twinkling, pinprick stars in a cloudless sky. Hands breached the hem of his t-shirt and smoothed over his chest before sliding back down to undo his jeans. Jared reached forward to assist with Red's undressing and was quietly rebuked.

"No, you first." Red took control.

His shoes, jeans, and underwear quickly shed, Jared propped up on his elbows to watch Red kneel before him and stroke his cock to stone. He sucked in air when Red took in first the aching tip, then more of

him. Pursing his lips tighter, Red moved in a slow, smooth rhythm that set Jared's heart pounding in double time. His balls tightened under the feather light brush of Red's other hand as it burrowed deep to find Jared's anus. Once at the target, Red probed gently, preparing him.

"God, that's good." His breathing labored and he whined for more attentions, then realized something. "Red, in my back pocket..." He pointed at his discarded jeans.

Red shook his head and smiled. "Way ahead of you, babe," he said, and produced a packet, which he tore open with his teeth. "Knees up," he then ordered as he shucked his lower clothes.

Jared obeyed and tilted his head to one side to admire Red's profile. In the park's backlight he looked impressive with his thick cock jutting out and upward. He could have that every day, free and clear, if he wanted.

I will, he knew. Any doubts Jared had about their relationship vanished with Red's news. They belonged to each other now.

With the condom fastened, Red knelt before Jared and guided his cock toward the entrance. He teased the hole a bit, obviously enjoying Jared's frustration. "Okay, babe. I know what you want. I need it, too." And he thrust into Jared, moaning with the contact.

"Yesss..." Jared hissed, and rolled his hips up higher to better set the angle for his lover. He extended his legs to hook his heels over Red's shoulders, and watched the play of emotion on the other man's face as he pressed deep into him. Slow slow fast, slow slow fast, the rhythm built until Red moved at a more urgent pace. Jared didn't mind, he preferred it rough, and he tugged at his own cock to time his climax with his lover's.

"It's coming, babe. Ohh." Red huffed and gasped; his head thrashed back and his eyes pinched shut, but he didn't stop pumping into Jared. Behind him came the first red glow shooting up into the night, and Jared realized the show had started.

A giant starburst with about a hundred red spikes exploded in the distance, and cheers erupted from the park. From Jared's point of view it appeared to halo his lover and symbolize the moment. He was about to explode himself.

He stroked his cock hard, feeling the orgasm pulse through him. "Now, Red," he cried, and groaned his own release just as another rocket lit up the night.

"Yes!" Red stilled, his cock buried to the hilt, then shuddered his own climax. His cock expanded and jerked inside Jared, and he clenched his nether muscles to prolong the feeling. In seconds,

however, Red was spent and he collapsed against him, his cock sliding free.

They cuddled and kissed in the afterglow, under the brightly-color display in the sky. Rockets released starbursts and heart shapes of dark reds, blues, and purples. They lay together on the flannel blanket, watching each one, neither bothered by the booming sounds of the celebration.

Jared leaned into his lover and whispered, “Happy Independence Day.” Yet Red seemed too entranced by the light show to have heard. No matter, Jared decided. There was plenty of time to talk later.

For now, he lay back to enjoy the holiday.

Let freedom ring.

About the Author

Leigh Ellwood writes spicy romances and sassy mysteries. She is the creator of the award-winning Dareville series for Phaze Books, as well as numerous shorts for Phaze and other small publishers. Readers are invited to visit LeighEllwood.com for more information on Leigh's books, and to follow Leigh's writing adventures via her blog at leighwantsfood.blogspot.com or through her Twitter at [Twitter.com/LeighEllwood](https://twitter.com/LeighEllwood).